

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS RELATED TO MAJOR STORM EVENTS

Q. How do I get information related to evacuations and/or road closures in my area?

A. For Montgomery County go to www.mctxoem.org. For Harris County go to www.traffic.houstontranstar.org or www.houstonemergency.org.

Q. Who warns the public when flooding is imminent?

A. During emergency operations, SJRA communicates information regarding its releases to a number of local emergency and law enforcement organizations who are responsible for notifying the public and managing any evacuations. These organizations include the National Weather Service, the Emergency Management Offices for Montgomery and Harris counties, and the Conroe Police and Fire Departments.

Q. Water is coming up to my back door, what should I do?

A. If you feel your life is in immediate danger, leave your home as soon as possible. If you are unable to leave your home on your own, call 911 or the non-emergency line for the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department, 936-760-5800. If water is in your house, never go into your attic. You could be trapped by rising water. Emergency officials recommend retreating to your roof if possible.

Q. What is the normal level of the reservoir? How high can it be raised?

A. The normal pool level is 201' MSL. SJRA has a flowage easement that allows raising the lake up to six feet over normal pool level during extreme storm events, which is a level of 207' MSL. This gives SJRA's reservoir operators a buffer zone within which to manage storm events. The top of the dam is at 212' MSL, and the water level can exceed 207' without threatening the structure of the dam.

Q. What is the maximum amount that can be released at one time?

A. The spillway gates are rated to handle a peak release in excess of 150,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) during an extreme storm event. Go to www.sjra.net to the General Information tab on the Lake Conroe website. The Lake Conroe Dam and Reservoir facts are located there. You can also access real-time lake release and level updates on our Home Page.

Q. Is the reservoir taking in more water than what can be released?

A. No, the dam is typically capable of releasing more than the inflow; however, the reservoir is designed so that peak releases from the dam can always remain LOWER than the peak inflows coming into the lake by temporarily allowing the water level to rise.

Q. How does Lake Conroe affect downstream flooding?

A. Because releases are kept at a lower rate than would have occurred if the dam had not been built, Lake Conroe actually reduces downstream flooding. Even though it was not designed for flood control, the Lake Conroe dam has significantly REDUCED downstream flooding for every major storm in the watershed since it was constructed in 1973.

Q. Can't SJRA just hold the water back and not release it?

A. No. SJRA operators have limited discretion in how they operate the spillway gates and are not able to simply "let the lake rise" to further reduce downstream flows. There is only about 18 inches of freeboard between the top of the spillway gates and the water level at normal pool, and the operators cannot allow the water to overtop the gates because they are not designed to sustain that type of force. Therefore, the gates must be raised as the lake level rises.

Q. What determines how SJRA operates its gates?

A. The main two goals of SJRA's gate operations are (i) to protect the spillway gates and the dam's earthen embankment, and (ii) to ensure that the peak flowrate released from the dam is always LOWER than the peak inflow coming into the lake.

Q. Why didn't SJRA just pre-release water before the storm to make more room to catch the water coming into the lake?

A. The San Jacinto River Authority never pre-releases water from Lake Conroe prior to a storm event for numerous reasons. First, in order to pre-release water at a reasonably safe rate (so that it doesn't cause flooding downstream), it would take weeks to accomplish enough drop in lake level to have any hope of buffering a major storm event. Forecasts aren't accurate enough that far in advance to make reasonable decisions about a major release of water. Second, if we did try to pre-release in advance of a storm, we would be artificially filling the river downstream and adding water to Lake Houston. If the heavy rains fell in other watersheds (which is highly likely given the relatively small size of our watershed), then we would have pre-filled the west fork of the river and Lake Houston, which could exacerbate downstream flooding problems. Third, if we pre-released and ended up not receiving significant rainfall in our watershed, then we would have drained critical supplies of stored water from Lake Conroe. Meteorologists simply cannot precisely predict how much and exactly where it is going to rain with enough notice (several weeks) to allow a safe pre-release from a reservoir. Finally, the general rule in this country is that dam operators may permit floodwaters to pass through a dam in an amount equal to the inflow but will be liable if any excess amount is discharged. For this reason, dam operators strictly adhere to gate operating protocols designed by their engineers, and pre-releasing is inconsistent with those protocols for the reasons stated above.

Q. How long will you continue to release?

A. During storm events, we will continue to release until the reservoir returns to the normal pool level of 201' MSL. Depending on weather conditions, this could take weeks.

Q. How do I find specific information about river levels at my location downstream of the Lake Conroe dam?

A. The National Weather Service hosts a website that provides river level forecasts at selected sites on many rivers and streams. <http://water.weather.gov/ahps2/index.php?wfo=hgx>

Q. Is there a lake elevation above which Lake Conroe is closed?

A. There is no formal threshold elevation for determining lake closures. However, at approximately 203' MSL, submerged obstacles, increased levels of floating debris, and other navigational hazards render the lake generally unsafe to motorized boating activities. The decision to close the lake ultimately rests with the SJRA.

Q. When will Lake Conroe crest and what will be the max elevation?

A. SJRA cannot precisely determine when Lake Conroe will crest during a storm event. Many variables are involved, which make estimating difficult. These include but are not limited to: rate and duration of rainfall, location of rainfall, soil moisture content, rate of controlled releases from the dam, etc.

Q. Who maintains and operates Lake Houston?

A. Lake Houston is owned by the City of Houston and is maintained and operated by the Coastal Water Authority under a service contract.